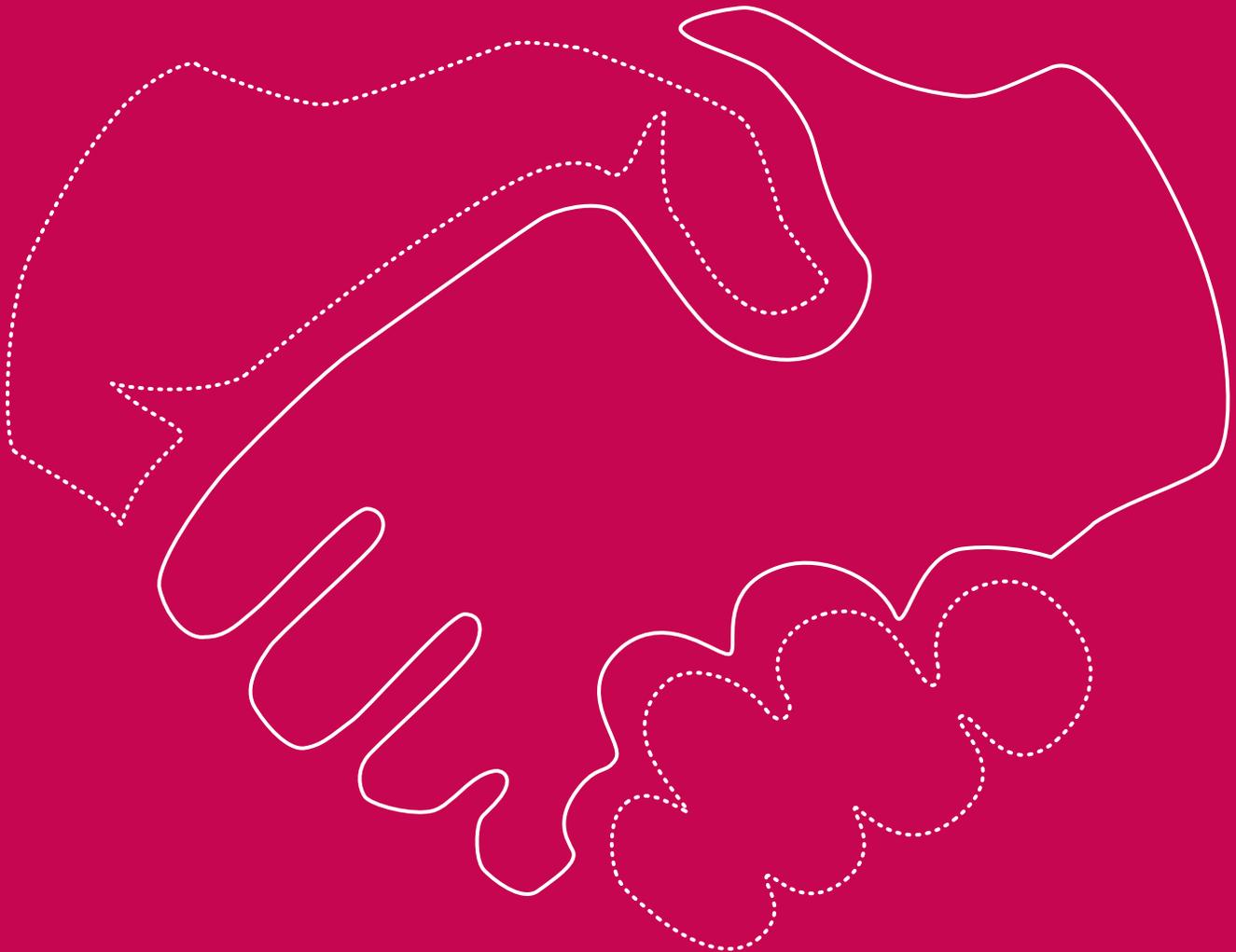


Relationship Building with Women Who Use Drugs

Relationships were described as one of the most important components that facilitate women’s use of a harm reduction program. When we asked what helps to build a positive relationship, we found that two specific qualities were essential:

- 1 Discretion and confidentiality
- 2 Trust



1 DISCRETION AND CONFIDENTIALITY

Discretion and confidentiality are important components of any effective harm reduction program. This was particularly true amongst women who have experienced violence, child welfare involvement or legal system involvement. Reducing the risk of unintentional disclosure of private information such as drug use can help women feel comfortable accessing services and prevent risk of negative consequences including violence and other harms.

"I always try to be aware of who might see me going to the agency. It's best when I can pick up supplies without anyone seeing me."

ASSESSMENT TOOL

The following questions were developed to help assess how discrete and confidential harm reduction services (or are perceived to be). Answer the following questions with "yes" or "no," and then, if necessary, identify strategies that may help to increase people's sense of confidentiality and discretion. The opposite page provides tips that may be helpful.

Assessment Tool

- | | | | |
|---|--|-----|----|
| 1 | Do people have to provide information to more than one staff member before accessing the harm reduction program? | YES | NO |
| 2 | Are people required to give identification or provide their real name in order to pick up harm reduction information or supplies? | YES | NO |
| 3 | Do people have to share information about their drug use or identity in front of others? Can other people hear information that is being shared? | YES | NO |
| 4 | Is private information written in a place where others may be able to see it? | YES | NO |
| 5 | Can others see what people are picking up? | YES | NO |
| 6 | Are supplies in packaging that is obvious / shows the content, or is marked with a harm reduction label? | YES | NO |

Insight: Perceptions of Confidentiality

If you answered “yes” to some or all of the questions on the previous page, consider ways your program may be able to shift policies or practices to foster discretion and confidentiality. Be creative. Brainstorm with your team. Here are some ideas that may help:

“I avoid using services that require my name or health card or whatever. I don’t feel safe in public spaces and or anywhere I am required to identify myself, because you never know where the info is going. I only use services that have a good reputation and can be trusted.”

“Having a membership card is really cool. I don’t have to say my name out loud, which helps. I just show my card. It makes me feel like I’m part of a club.”

Tips

- For harm reduction supply distribution, use bags that are discreet and non-identifying.
- When welcoming people into the program, take the opportunity to talk about the importance of confidentiality.
- Create confidential client / participant codes or membership cards. This way you can collect data, while also ensuring people don’t have to share identifying information in front of others. Some programs also use this as an opportunity to foster a sense of community and belonging.
- Put harm reduction supplies in spaces where people don’t have to speak to multiple staff if they don’t want to (e.g., the reception desk, shared spaces, or program areas where appropriate).
- Provide space for private conversations including intake meetings or harm reduction counselling sessions.
- Ensure staff are trained on confidentiality and privacy practices, including the Personal Health Information Protection Act.
- Post information about the importance of confidentiality. For example, some harm reduction programs have posters that say “Privacy and confidentiality are important to us. If you have ideas about how we can do better, please talk to us or drop an anonymous note off in our feedback box.”

2 TRUST

Feeling trusted and respected by staff helps build positive relationships. Many women shared experiences about feeling distrusted and the negative impact it had on their use of the program. When thinking about this, it's important to acknowledge that many women who use drugs do not trust staff due to negative and stigmatizing experiences. This was highlighted in our consultations as being particularly true for women who face multiple layers of discrimination and judgment. For these reasons, fostering trust is an ongoing process and can take time.

You can help foster trust by:

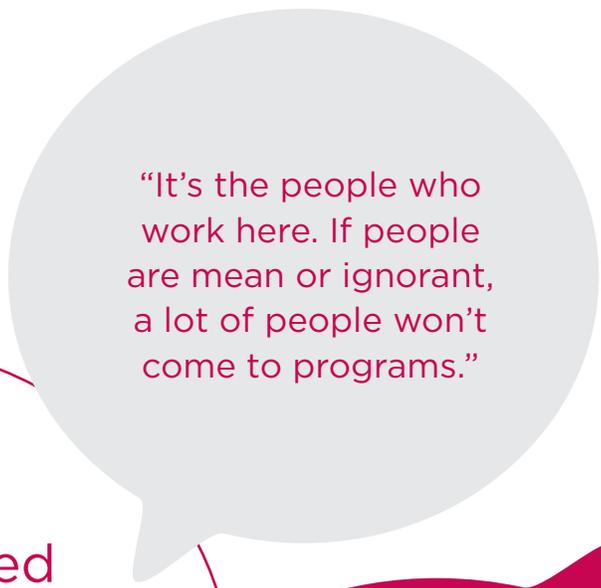
- **Respecting women**
- **Honouring privacy rights**
- **Consulting women on service practices**
- **Engaging women in decision making**

Tips

- Consider holding a consultation with women who use drugs to ask what would help to build trust. Ask women to talk about experiences that lead to women who use drugs not trusting service providers, and to brainstorm and share examples about actions that have helped to build trust.



“The staff followed me into the washroom, asking what I was doing.”



“It’s the people who work here. If people are mean or ignorant, a lot of people won’t come to programs.”



“The staff asked me a lot of questions about where my kid is and why I’m using drugs. It just felt really judgmental. He asked me right in front of my friend.”